

OKLAHOMA STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

DATE: July 18, 2002

TIME: 9:30 a.m.

PLACE: Oklahoma State University Student Center
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

PRESENT: Darrel Dominick, Chairman, NRCS
Don Black, Quail Unlimited
John Hendrix, Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation
Ken Williams, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Wally Olson, Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative
Jack Eckroat, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service
Trent Holland, Cherokee Nation
Lawrence R. Edmison, Oklahoma Conservation Commission
Weldon Schieffer, Institute for Issue Management
Calvin Waln, Resourceful Strategies
Jerald Ratcliff, FSA State Committee
Joseph L. Ramsey, Institute for Issue Management
John Fanta, Bureau of Indian Affairs
Erich Wehrenberg, Oklahoma Wheat Growers Association
Jerry Brabander, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Kurtis L. Atkinson, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture
Joe T. Kelly, FSA State Committee
Chris Hise, The Nature Conservancy
Amy May, Environmental Protection Agency
Brad Lamb, Environmental Protection Agency
Larry Wiemers, Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation
Rod Wanger, Farm Service Agency
Jay Franklin, FSA State Committee
Chongo Mundende, Langston University
Ginger Lyde, Farm Service Agency
David Engle, OSU Rangeland
Jean Steiner, USDA/ARS
J.D. Strong, Office of Secretary for Environment
Jennifer Wasinger, Office of Secretary for Environment
Nappe Cowan, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Osage Agency
Jim Reese, FSA State Executive Director
Mary White, FSA State Committee
Deanetta Walker, Farm Service Agency
Janell Smalts, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture
Fred Wyatt, FSA State Committee
Sam C. Johnston, Poultry Growers Association
Dan Sebert, Oklahoma Conservation Commission
Marla Peek, Oklahoma Farm Bureau
Mike Houts, Department of Environmental Quality
Kevin Norton, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Chris Stoner, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Suzanne Collier, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Lanny Miller, Natural Resources Conservation Service
B. Ted Kuntz, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Randy Freeland, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Joni Hays, Natural Resources Conservation Service

1. Meeting Called to Order – Darrel Dominick, Chairman

Darrel Dominick, Chairman, called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. All present made introductions by stating their name and agency, organization, or group affiliation. This meeting was held in compliance with the Oklahoma Open Meeting Laws.

2. Opening Remarks – Darrel Dominick, NRCS

Darrel stated that there is an opportunity with the new Farm Bill for conservation that we have never had. We need to do the best we can, and the best way is to have input from people like those in this meeting. He commented that there are challenges with any opportunity, and we will get better at handling it and continue to learn. We need to start thinking about natural resource issues; it is about relationships, working hand-in-hand with people on the landscape in Oklahoma. The State Technical Committee is an advisory committee, and your time and agency organization's dedication to conservation are appreciated. The 2002 Farm Bill provides an 80% increase in funding, and some programs are evolving and changing.

3. Overview of the Farm Bill - Kevin Norton, NRCS

Kevin Norton gave a Power Point presentation Overview of the Farm Bill. Kevin stated that the 2002 Farm Bill represents the single most significant commitment of resources toward conservation on private lands in the nation's history. It applies to all natural resources, places strong emphasis on the conservation of working lands, provides farmers and ranchers with voluntary conservation programs, builds upon past conservation gains, responds to the call for a balanced portfolio of tools for conservation, provides significant additional funding to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, creates a new Conservation Security Program, reauthorizes the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Farmland Protection Program, Conservation Reserve Program, and Wetlands Reserve Program, and provides permanent reauthorization of the Resource Conservation and Development Program. Conservation Provisions include the: Conservation of Private Grazing Land Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Security Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Farmland Protection Program, Resource Conservation and Development Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. Kevin discussed the key points as well as projected funding for the above listed programs. He reported that the new Farm Bill provides for confidentiality of case file data and location of National Resources Inventory data points. The PowerPoint presentation Kevin utilized may be accessed at the following website: www.ok.nrcs.usda.gov. Kevin also commented that minutes from State Technical Committee meetings are also provided at this website. He provided a handout which each agency should complete and submit to the NRCS State Office which designates an agency contact and subcommittee representative to work on different issues.

4. Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - Kevin Norton, NRCS

Kevin discussed the major changes for EQIP beginning in FY 2003. He commented that NRCS will work with the State Technical Committee and provide them with more information on signups, etc. as the Committee's help is needed in order to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate in this program. Kevin discussed statewide natural resource priorities that were derived from local stakeholder meetings held by NRCS & Conservation Districts. He discussed the importance of having local people at the table describing what natural resource needs are. There should be a Conservation Needs Assessment developed at stakeholder meetings, and a Conservation Action Plan.

Handouts were provided which detailed locally-led resource concerns by county and by resource concern, as well as, a weighted resource concern summary. John Hendrix commented that food is not an issue for wildlife. Kevin responded that we need to look at what locally-led process that came from. He also stated that in the WHIP program, there is a significant amount of funding for wildlife issues, but if the local level believes wildlife is an issue, they can use EQIP funds for that. NRCS would like to see EQIP directed toward more ag-related issues.

A handout was provided listing a "proposed" allocation for EQIP; Kevin emphasized that the handout did not include the actual amount of funding. The state allocation for 2003 is unknown at this time. The Farm Bill provides for "Regional Equity" where each state would receive \$12 million dollars (the CSP, CRP, and WRP programs are not included in this). The allocation = equity base + "Local Emphasis Area" + locally-led natural resources. Kevin stated that "Local Emphasis Areas" will be available if the local workgroup decides they wish to continue with their current priority area. A handout was also provided which lists the "Local Emphasis Areas". A question was asked if the Committee would have a chance to work with the formula. Kevin stated that local emphasis areas will be on the table and prioritization of issues at the local level. Brad Lamb commented that it would depend on how strong leadership is in a particular county, and Kevin responded that Darrel is working with NRCS employees on the leadership issue. Darrel commented that we are here to work to get things done (all of us), and we need to have the local buy-in to get things accomplished. J.D. Strong commented that we need to migrate from equity based and work on emphasis areas as we educate. Kevin stated that as the pot of money grows, we have an opportunity to work on resource issues and emphasis areas. A comment was made that the biggest issue is communication among stakeholders -- how we are going to educate the mass of producers, and Kevin stated that there will be a training effort with NRCS and other agencies. Rod Wanger commented that there is \$12 million dollars in unfunded applications, and it is his hope that we do not disguise priority areas as local emphasis areas. Rod said that with \$100,000, we might be only talking about 10 contracts in a county. Kevin responded that we are not originating or requiring priority areas; all came from local areas prioritizing their issues, and a lot of issues on the list are not "state" issues, but "county" issues.

A chart detailing the list of locally-led natural resource priorities which were submitted by the local field offices was brought before the committee, and each agency was given the opportunity to vote four times. Brush (Redcedar) received the most votes with 23, followed by Surface Water Contaminates (Nutrients & Organics) with 13 votes, Erosion (Sheet & Rill - Cropland) with 10 votes, Erosion/Gullies (Grazingland) with 8 votes, and Groundwater Contaminates (Nutrients) with 8 votes to comprise the top five. Questions were asked concerning grazinglands and gullies (flow-classic or flow-ephemeral).

A handout entitled, "Referral to Locally-Led Level" was provided to the Committee. The form may be submitted to the NRCS State Office and will be forwarded to the local NRCS office and local conservation district for consideration in the locally-led conservation process. Brad Lamb commented that even though locally-led, with the issues, we need to keep in mind that it is an opportunity to do some good for all, not just agriculture. Kevin stated that we need to have a common understanding of what will be done and how we will show accomplishments. J.D. Strong asked if the measures of success will be shown in environmental benefits achieved, or just how many acres treated, etc. Kevin stated that there is a lot of latitude in describing environmental benefits and accomplishments.

A handout entitled, "Oklahoma Model Resource Concern Ranking Criteria" was provided to the Committee. Fred Wyatt asked why there is a different score for poultry, dairy, swine, and feedlot. Kevin responded that this was a suggestion from the local level and could be changed or not used at all. There is flexibility at the local level. Brad Lamb commented that he feels NRCS has the responsibility to provide guidance to the local level and should not just turn things over to local people. Kevin stated that NRCS does not let local people ignore a serious environmental problem and it is our responsibility to inform them; we are providing a model which the local people can modify. Darrel stated that we will provide more information and education to the local level and will be actively working with them to address issues. Kevin commented that we need some level of guidance to start with in order to optimize environmental benefits. Jean Steiner made a comment concerning which species and the proximity to water bodies making it a problem. Lanny Miller stated that this document will develop over time, and suggestions and questions should be forwarded to NRCS. J.D. Strong stated he believes this model is a good idea. Kevin said the document will probably be brought before the EQIP subcommittee before finalizing it.

Kevin stated that the Conservation Practice and Cost Lists are all available on the website. He asked that the Committee review the lists and provide NRCS with comments. The cost lists are reviewed and updated annually.

Kevin stated that the Farm Bill provided \$25 million dollars nationally for FY 2003 for surface and groundwater conservation. Therefore, a signup is being held July 1-19, 2002, for the High Plains Aquifer Groundwater Conservation Area which includes Cimarron, Texas, Beaver, Harper, Ellis, Roger Mills, Beckham, and Woodward counties. A handout was provided with details about the High Plains Aquifer. This is a separate earmark over and above our EQIP allocation. A question was asked about the seep rate in this part of the state. This is a very important aquifer (500-1,000 feet deep) that serves a lot of communities as well as agriculture and covers 8 states. It is moving probably only 1 foot/100 years. It was asked if this area meets the definition, and Kevin responded that there is not definition but we need to find something tied to a period of time. It has to be irrigated land. A comment was made that the Water Board may have data that could be utilized for this purpose. It was also suggested that we could add 5/13/02 to the statement, "land irrigated 4 of past 6 years". Brad Lamb asked if Texas has made a decision on their criteria, and Kevin stated they had decided on 3 or 4 of the previous 5 years. J.D. Strong commented that the most efficient systems should get the highest consideration, which ones pull the least out of the aquifer. Kevin stated that we need to fine-tune this process, and if there are other ideas, please let him know. Weldon Schieffer asked about issues regarding water rights and did the fear of losing water enter into this. Kevin said that water rights do not enter into it as we are about conservation of water. Safety does enter into it, and we will cost-share on capping wells.

5. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) - Kevin Norton, NRCS

The WHIP program was essentially unchanged in the 2002 Farm Bill. NRCS has approximately 500 applications on hand for \$4.8 million dollars; probably 400 of these are quality applications for \$4 million dollars. A discussion of WHIP included the issues of the Lesser Prairie Chicken, Arkansas River Shiner, and Prairie Dog. A was provided which provides the ranking criteria. ODWC and FWS assisted in the development of the criteria. There is a 75% cost-share limit, but no maximum limitation for contracts. It was suggested that we fund up to \$50,000 per contract and anything over \$50,000 would require a subcommittee review and determination. John Hendrix stated he thinks it is a good idea that anything over \$50,000 be reviewed. Don Black asked a question regarding long-term programs when land is sold or the participant dies, is there an option to continue with a penalty? Kevin responded that there might be a penalty or a re-payment of cost-shares if the assuming buyer does not continue with the contract. Don asked if that will be the case with the Grassland Reserve Program, and Kevin does not know until the rules are published for this new program. Fred Wyatt stated that he would make a motion that there is a \$50,000 maximum payment limitation for WHIP in order to give more people an opportunity for the program. John Hendrix commented that there would be more benefits to wildlife with no maximum payment limitation. Chris Hise stated that he feels we should spread the money around the state, but there are higher quality resources in some areas than others being more cost-effective.

6. Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) - Chris Stoner, NRCS

A handout was provided to the Committee entitled, "Preliminary Planning and Ranking Criteria Checklist". Chris stated that this checklist was revised as restoration costs have increased, and multipliers have been added in. We have a large backlog list for the program; however, with a large allocation we should take care of all applicants on the list this fiscal year and next. Chris commented that the Red Slough WRP in McCurtain County is a model WRP project. Special project areas (comprised of adjacent landowners) are also enrolled into the program, and the ranking criteria is not used for these areas as they are automatically enrolled.

7. Farmland Protection Program (FPP) - Kevin Norton, NRCS

Kevin commented that one project in Norman has been enrolled into this program, and it is in the process of being closed on with the Trust for Public Land. Another project is being pursued with them also, and it is left to non-government agencies to take the lead on these projects. Kevin stated that there may be a need for leadership at the state level.

8. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)/Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) - Rod Wanger, FSA

Rod discussed the Continuous CRP program for which producers may sign up at anytime, and provided a list of eligible practices. There is a signup bonus (Signup Incentive Payment) as well as a rental rate incentive. Rod asked the Committee for consideration of support of incidental grazing of CRP Continuous Signup practices in wheat pasture from November - March. There is no annual rental payment reduction if less than 5% of the field is utilized. John Hendrix stated that he agreed with this, and thinks it should be native grass.

Rod also discussed the CREP which takes continuous signup practices. This program requires that partners provide added bonuses with a 20% match by the state. An area is targeted, and there is flexibility in practices. This program addresses specific environmental problems, and 100% cost-share is an additional incentive. The goal is to improve water quality, and with state's assistance, can go longer than 10-15 year contract. Larry Edmison reported that OCC has proposed a possibility of Oklahoma and Arkansas working on a proposal, and would be very interested if funds become available. John Hendrix reported that there is a possibility of \$240,000 available to look at this program, and a meeting will be held soon on this. Darrel stated that FPP, CREP, and Watershed Rehabilitation Work proposals should be considered. He reported there are more structures in Oklahoma than any other state, but need state-matching funds.

Don Black reported that there is a Quail Symposium in Kingfisher on August 8th from 9:00 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

9. Adjournment – Darrel Dominick

The meeting adjourned at 3:30 p.m.